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ABSTRACT

The instructional and political validity of current educational policy regarding categorical programs for low-achieving elementary school students are examined. The categorical organization of services for these students, characterized by a vast array of eligibility requirements, rules and regulations, and accounting systems, has resulted in a sense of fragmentation at many levels. Fragmentation of services takes two forms: (1) between basic education and special programs; and (2) among special programs. Only the latter is considered in the unified approach advocated in this paper, not the merging of regular and special programs. Attempts to reduce fragmentation by unifying categorical programs must address certain issues in the realms of instructional and political validity. Of concern in instructional validity are questions about similarities and differences between learning disabled and remedial students in instructional levels, learning rates, and "learning styles." Data from two studies suggest that the similarities in instructional level and learning rates are greater than the differences. The political issues requiring resolution before implementing a unified system include protection and equitable distribution of resources, participation in decision making, and protection of jobs. Benefits of a unified system and issues that policymakers must address are discussed. (VW)

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Exploring the Validity of a Unified Learning Program for Remedial and Handicapped Students

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ABSTRACT

This article is an examination of the instructional and political validity of current educational policy regarding categorical programs for low-achieving elementary school students. A widely recognized problem in the categorical organization of services for these students is fragmentation at all levels. Any attempt to reduce that fragmentation by unifying the categorical programs must address three issues each in the realms of instructional and political validity. Among the instructional validity issues are questions about the similarities and differences between learning disabled and remedial students in instructional levels, learning rates, and "learning styles." Data from two studies suggest that the similarities in instructional level and learning rates are greater than the differences. The political issues requiring resolution before implementation of a unified system are protection and equitable distribution of resources, participation in decision making, and protection of jobs. Benefits of a unified system and issues that policy-makers must address are discussed.

Exploring the Validity of a Unified Learning Program for Remedial and Handicapped Students

In this article, we examine the instructional validity of current educational policy regarding categorical programs serving low-achieving students. We raise questions about the relative instructional level and learning rates of learning disabled (LD) and other remedial students, and about the instructional methodologies best suited for these student groups. These questions lie at the heart of the rationale for categorically organized special programs for low-achieving students and the means by which such programs can optimize their services, concerns that are central to the regular education initiative (Will, 1986). Examination of the instructionally relevant learner characteristics of LD and remedial students will help address issues like these: the extent to which LD and remedial programs serve children with different instructional needs; the feasibility of grouping LD and remedial children together for instruction; and whether or not the majority of low-achieving, special needs children could be served within one integrated program with one funding source, one set of rules and regulations, and one administration rather than as they are now served in a host of distinct categorical programs.

Before decribing the problems with our present system, we want to emphasize that these problems do not tract from the worth of individual programs nor from tne validity of the reasons that led to tneir establishment. The fact that solutions to one set of problems create still other problems may be inevitable in the evolution of any system. Yet, it is

no accident that task forces, federal initiatives, and discussions in the literature now focus on the lack of coordination among services to low-achieving children and ways of addressing that problem. These discussions are also occurring among administrators and teachers at the district and building levels. There is a healthy questioning of the validity and usefulness of the current relationship among separate, narrowly defined programs and a willingness to entertain the possibility of cooperation and integration of programs and services. A paramount issue is whether the present system provides the best possible instruction for children and enables teachers and administrators to provide their services with optimal effectiveness and efficiency.

Instructional problems posed by individual differences are a fact of life in classrooms. By some estimates, as high as 25% of elementary aged students are considered unable to learn basic skills under ordinary classroom conditions (Birman, 1979). As a means of easing the instructional problems that arise from student diversity, lawmakers have created a host of special programs. These categorical programs -- special education, Chapter I, and in many states and local districts remedial programs -- were created to meet specific needs: providing an appropriate education to children with disabilities, overcoming the effects of poverty, or assisting low-achieving students (Leinhardt, Bickel, & Pallay, 1982). As they now exist, each program functions separately, conforming to regulations that discourage cross-program integration and the sharing of instructional resources. Students with learning disabilities are taught in special education programs by special education teachers, students with limited English proficiency are taught by teachers funded through bilingual programs, and remedial students are taught

in various remedial programs sponsored by the federal government (Chapter I-Disadvantaged and Migrant), by state government, or by local school districts. The introduction of categorical programs, each created at a different time and emphasizing the needs of a specific target group, followed a pattern that Reynolds and Wang (1983) characterized as disjointed incrementalism, rather than pursuit of a comprehensive program that addressed the needs of all or at least the majority of students experiencing difficulty learning in the classroom.

Services for low-achieving children in elementary school are characterized by a bewildering array of eligibility requirements, rules and regulations, and accounting systems. The result is often a sense of fragmentation at many levels. Programs which may be quite similar at the teacher-child level are managed by different administrators, implemented by different teachers, and provided only to certain children who in fact may be more similar to than different from children in other programs. If special teachers are funded by more than one program, then strict accounting of time and services is required to satisfy regulatory demands. When these programs use a pull-out model, the classroom resembles a rail station, with arrivals, departures, groupings and regroupings -- the teacher acting as a dispatcher and students traveling to different destinations. A child might receive remedial help in spelling from one program, reading in another, math in still another. While there is nothing inherently wrong in providing diversity of instruction to children (and in some cases this may work to the child's advantage), the "system" as a whole lacks rational coherence.

Fragmentation of services takes two forms: (1) between basic education and special programs, and (2) among special programs. Both have been

discussed in the special education literature, most often with emphasis on the former (Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1984). We must emphasize that the fragmentation referred to in this article is within special programs, the group of categorical programs designed to serve specific populations of children with mild to moderate learning or behavior problems, whatever the etiology or genesis of those problems (e.g., cultural differences, economic disadvantage, learning disability). The issue under discussion here is not the merging of regular and special programs into a single system or subsuming one to the other. Neither do we focus on mainstreaming per se or the specific environment where special programs are delivered (e.g., the regular classroom, resource room, or remedial reading room), or the different service providers (classroom teachers, special or remedial education teachers, or aides). Rather, our focus is on integration of special programs that provide instruction supplementary or complementary to, or that supplant, basic education provided by classroom teachers. The fragmentation of these services is the presenting problem, and it is difficult to defend.

In our view, the success of any effort to coordinate and integrate services for low-achieving children will depend on addressing and resolving two general validity issues. The first is instructional, the second is political. In this article, we will concentrate on the first issue, with data from recent studies suggesting that there are instructionally valid reasons for integrating services to low-achieving children. We then discuss the political validity of establishing a unified program.

Instructional Validity

What is instructionally more valid: the present system of discrete special programs or a reformed system of services where all low-achieving students can be taught under one coordinated, unified program? Put another way, do the students taught in the various categorical programs have different enough instructional needs to justify separate programs, or are they similar enough to warrant noncategorical grouping for instruction?

Many child characteristics can affect teachers' decisions about instructional grouping. The pedagogical literature is top heavy with rhetoric about the importance of recognizing individual differences and the necessity to tailor instruction accordingly. The number of measurable human traits approaches infinity, and measurement of any of these traits will result in a range of scores. Teachers who attempted to individualize instruction according to each student's traits and preferences would be paralyzed by the requirement for comprehensive preinstructional assessments, not to mention the planning required to use those data in designing instruction.

Although the list of potentially measurable human traits is overwhelming, in practice we need ask but one question: on what traits do individual differences create different instructional needs? This question reduces a myriad of traits to three instructionally relevant trait categories: instructional level, learning rate, and learning style.

The instructional validity of the "unified program" concept, i.e., integration of remedial and special education, depends on answers to three questions: (1) Are students from the various groups at different instructional levels? (2) Do students from various categorical programs learn

at different rates to such an extent that their progress would be hindered if they were taught together? and (3) Is the type of instruction appropriate for one group not appropriate for the other? These are discussed below.

Instructional Levels of LD and Remedial Populations

According to Slavin (1987a), possibly the most difficult problem of school and classroom organization is providing instruction at an appropriate level. He defines appropriate instructional level as the situation where "the teacher makes sure that students are ready to learn a new lesson (e.g., they have the necessary skills and knowledge to learn it) but have not already learned the lesson" (p. 92).

The organizational problem referred to by Slavin is how to strike a balance between teaching each child at the appropriate level yet provide instruction to several students at the same time. Grouping elementary aged students according to instructional level is an educational practice born of conventional wisdom and supported by research (Slavin, 1987b). Do categorical special programs maximize appropriate groupings of students for instruction--i.e., do their divisions correspond with the divisions that would be made by a teacher attempting to separate students according to instructional level; or do categorical programs artificially separate students whose instructional level is similar?

No previous research has directly addressed the comparability of LD and other low-achieving students' instructional levels. The closest relevant research we could locate were studies that compared the mean achievement of various student types. This research has produced a somewhat confusing picture partly because different studies have used different types of measures

(e.g., commercial achievement tests vs. curriculum based assessments), compared different research populations (e.g., regular education, special education, Chapter 1, low-achieving, and LD students), and employed very different sample sizes (from as few as 15 to more than 600 students per group). Two studies reported large mean differences between groups (Shinn, Ysseldyke, Deno, & Tindal, 1986; Shinn, Tindal, Spira, & Marston, 1987), another indicated statistical but little practical differences between the groups (Ysseldyke, Algozinne, Shinn, & McGue, 1982), still another discovered significant differences at some grade levels, but not others (Marston & Magnusson, 1985), and one revealed no significant differences between group means (Candler, Johnson, & Green, 1983).

We will describe two recent studies that examine in what we believe is a more direct manner the comparability of instructional level of students served in special education and various remedial programs. In the first study (Jenkins, Peterson & Schrag, 1987) discussed below, we examined more extensive samples of these populations than were described in earlier studies, using not only a larger sample, but also one drawn across grade levels and school districts. Moreover, rather than using an arbitrary achievement score cut-off to define low-achieving nonhandicapped students, we functionally defined this group as all students whom schools served in remedial programs. Similarly, LD students were defined as those students identified as LD and served by schools in special education programs. Most importantly, however, we used score distributions rather than mean differences to compare the two groups. In this way we hoped to determine the relative instructional levels of children served in adjacent but separate programs within the same schools.

In the second study we examined the instructional groupings in one school district where students from various categorical programs were assigned to groups on the basis of instructional needs rather than by categorical labels. We wanted to know whether a more naturalistic than regulatory system for grouping -- simply, at what level the children are performing in school rather than what eligibility criteria they meet -- would result in categorically intact or mixed instructional groups. The extent to which children from different categorical programs are successfully placed together for instruction can be taken as one indicator of their similar instructional needs.

STUDY 1

This study uses performance on standardized achievement tests as a proxy for instructional level. To precisely determine instructional level usually demands measurements that are curriculum referenced. However, because performance on achievement and curriculum referenced tests is highly correlated, with coefficients in the range of .80-.95 (Deno, Mirkin, & Chiang, 1982; Fuchs & Deno, 1981), instructional level can be roughly estimated by examining students' achievement levels.

Subjects. The original sample included over 7,000 students from grades 1-6 in 28 schools (6 school districts). The tested sample included 276 LD students, 955 remedial students, and 6,496 regular students. LD students were included if they were served in regular classrooms for more than 50% of the school day. Remedial students were served in either Chapter I, Washington State's Remedial Assistance Program, or local district remedial programs, which four of the six participating school districts operated. In general, students were considered "regular" if they were not served in a remedial or a

special education program. Students were considered LD or remedial in a subject area only if they received instruction in that area. For example, students were considered LD in reading, but classified as regular in spelling if they received special education services in reading, but not in spelling.

Procedure. In autumn 1985, all participating schools administered standardized achievement tests to all students in grades 1-6. Students who were estimated to be performing at 2 years below grade level, or whose achievement was too low to be validly tested on the grade level tests, were given a test (off-level) below their current grade placement.

Results are reported in Normal Curve Equivalences (NCEs), a statistic similar to percentiles; however, unlike percentiles, NCEs have equal interval properties. NCEs range from 1 to 99 and are computed in normalized standard deviation units. Test data for students given off-level tests were translated back to grade level norms so that the scores for all students within a grade level were comparable.

Results: Differences Between LD and Remedial Students. The mean reading NCE of the LD group (22.7) was significantly lower than that of the remedial group (31.6) as was the arithmetic NCE (23.6 vs. 35.5) but spelling NCEs (18.4 vs. 20.8) were comparable. For details see Jenkins, Peterson, and Schrag, 1987.

Figure 1 shows the relative distribution of regular, remedial, and LD students' reading achievement. To facilitate comparisons between the groups, we plotted percentages rather than numbers of students, because the number of students in the three groups greatly differed.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Despite the large mean differences, the amount of overlap in the LD and remedial distributions is striking, with the greatest overlap between NCE scores 15 and 50. In fact, there is overlap in the distributions at every point along the NCE scale, suggesting that for every student in one group there are students in the other group who obtained a like score. Moreover, the overlap between the remedial and LD students is far greater than the overlap between regular and LD students or between regular and remedial students. Using achievement level, it is far easier to distinguish between LD and regular students than between LD and remedial students.

The answer to our question, "How similar are LD and remedial students' achievement -- i.e., instructional level?" depends upon how one looks at the two groups. Focusing on the means of the groups emphasizes their differences. Focusing on the distribution of the two groups emphasizes their similarities. Although the average LD student scored lower than the average remedial student in reading and arithmetic, many LD and remedial students had identical achievement levels. The results of Study 1 suggest that teachers would combine LD and low-achieving students to form instructional groups if they were to use instructional level as a grouping criterion rather than the students' category labels.

STUDY 2

A second way to investigate correspondence in instructional level among students served in various categorical programs is to examine actual instructional groupings of students who are served in an integrated program. School districts are strongly inclined to keep programs separated rather than integrate them because the maze of specific program regulations, standards,

and fiscal tracking requirements pose a significant deterrent to integration. If they bypass regulations for the separate programs (fiscal accounting, teacher certification, and eligibility criteria) they do so at their peril. Mukilteo School District in Washington State is one that has succeeded in coordinating categorical programs at the level of instructional services in seven elementary schools (Felix & Hertlein, 1987). In this district, multiple categorical programs operate under a single service program, and students from various categories are grouped for instruction on the basis of curriculum based measurements of instructional level, rather than category. Therefore, it is possible to determine the extent to which students from various categories function at similar instructional levels by examining the composition of instructional groups.

Procedure. We examined the composition of every instructional group that was formed for students funded under the following special programs: special education, Chapter I, bilingual, the state-funded remedial program, and the district-funded remedial services. Reading, math, spelling, language, communication, and study skills were foci of instruction. The coordinated service model made extensive use of the Direct Instruction Programs published by Science Research Associates, e.g., Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading. Teachers assessed students' instructional level and assigned them to groups using the placement tests accompanying these programs. We selected for examination the instructional groups as constituted in December, 1986.

Results. Table 1 shows the total number of discrete instructional groups across the seven schools. Out of 173 groups, 67 (39%) included at least one special education student. However, only 4 of 67 groups (6%) were composed

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Insert Table 1 about here

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exclusively of special education students. Of the four groups that included only special education students, two provided instruction in study skills (these were the only study skills instructional groups in the school), and two were reading groups. Thus, when teachers used curriculum based assessments to determine students' placement in a curriculum sequence, they formed homogeneous instructional groups that included a mixing of students who had different categorical labels.

Taken together, these studies suggest that special categorical programs do not divide students according to their instructional level. Indeed they appear to separate students who on the basis of instructional level would be placed together. At the very least, it seems that a unified program for low-achieving students would not violate the element of instructional validity that calls for student groupings consistent with instructional level.

Learning Rate

We now consider the second instructional validity issue, learning rate. Do categorical programs divide students according to their learning rates so that students who progress at similar rates are grouped together? Alternatively, would a unified program inadvertantly increase the chances that students who vary greatly in learning rate are detrimentally grouped together? This validity issue boils down to the question of the comparability of learning rates of LD and remedial students.

Measurement of this second trait category relevant to instruction, the speed at which students learn, requires repeated testing and is complicated by the fact that learning speed varies not only among students but also within individual students -- a student might make faster progress in mathematics than in reading.

We were able to locate four studies that compared the learning rates of special education and remedial groups. None of the studies were designed expressly to compare learning rates of the two populations. As a result, the statistics reported in several investigations, mean differences, do not adequately portray the similarities and differences in learning rates of LD and remedial groups. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that, on the average, LD students progress more slowly than their remedial peers.

Marston and Magnusson (1985), using curriculum referenced measures, reported that Chapter I students' average learning slopes in reading were significantly steeper than those of their special education peers. Over a 16-week period, Chapter I students on the average increased their correct word reading by 2.8 words per week whereas special education students increased by 1.7 words per week.

Using similar measures, Shinn, Ysseldyke, Deno, and Tindal (1986) compared LD and low-achieving students' acquisition rates for reading and spelling. Remedial and LD students increased their correctly read words by 2.35 vs. 1.74 words per week, respectively, and increased their correctly spelled words by .64 vs. .52 words per week, respectively. In contrast to the Marston and Magnusson (1985) results, the Shinn et al. (1986) differences were not significant, but this may have been because of the shorter duration of the latter study and smaller sample size.

O'Shea and Vacante (1986) studied LD students and low achievers longitudinally over several years using standardized achievement tests. Low achievers made significantly greater gains than those of their LD peers in math and language between grades 2 and 5. Gains in reading were not significantly different for the two groups, but favored remedial students.

Using the same population described above in Study 1 of this article, Jenkins, Peterson, and Schrag (1987) compared the achievement gains of LD, remedial, and regular students over one school year. Remedial students gained over twice as many NCE points as LD students in reading (7.4 vs. 3.5, respectively), showed more than three times the growth in arithmetic (5.89 vs. 1.87), and more than twice the growth in spelling (6.07 vs. 2.49).

However, we believe that using groups means to compare the average relative achievement gain of LD and remedial students is as misleading as is using group means to compare the relative instructional levels of these groups. Mean differences mask the similarities between the groups. Figure 2

Insert Figure 2 about here

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shows the overlap in annual achievement gains by students in the Jenkins et al. (1987) study. Although the remedial group on the average made larger gains than did the LD group, the similarities between the groups are more remarkable than the differences. The distributions of remedial and LD scores reveal large variability and considerable overlap, similar to that seen on measures of instructional level (e.g., in Studies 1 and 2), suggesting that many students in one group would have learning rates virtually identical to those of students in the other group.

In summary, is a mean difference in learning rate between remedial and LD students a serious obstacle to the creation of a unified service system for low achievers? No more so than is the mean differences between remedial and LD students on instructional level. At most, group differences in learning rates between remedial and LD students would suggest that teachers would on the average advance remedial students into higher groups more often than LD students. Teachers who adhere to a policy of flexible and fluid grouping can periodically reassign students to instructional groups when their rate of progress appears to differ significantly from what was predicted or from the rest of the group's rate, thus keeping achievement and skill levels of the members relatively homogeneous. Thus, in principle, a unified program for low-achieving and LD students would not violate the standard of instructional validity that calls for pacing instruction consistent with student learning rate.

Appropriateness of Instructional Type

In our third question--Is the type of instruction appropriate for one group not also appropriate for the other?--we move from instructional level and rate of learning to a third category of child trait that is potentially relevant to instruction. This can, for lack of a better label, be referred to as "student learning style" that results in the need for a particular brand of instruction.

Experience with the unique instructional needs of people with sensory impairments (e.g., Braille for the blind, sign language for the hearing impaired) invites the generalization that specially adapted instruction is needed by the vast majority of handicapped students (Lloyd, 1984). Moreover,

strong intuitive appeal surrounds the notion that different individuals learn in different ways--and, by extension, different teaching methodologies are required for different students. We return to the policy question: Is it instructionally valid to separate categorical programs on the basis of need for different teaching methodologies? Or the converse: Are the instructional approaches appropriate for one special categorical group not equally appropriate for another? We could locate no studies in which categorical label interacted with instructional methodology, nor does there seem to be a literature on this topic (Lloyd, 1984; Morsink, Thomas, & Smith-Davis, in press).

Even in the most general terms, the concept of aptitude for specialized instruction is long on face validity and short on empirically measured, scientific validity. Attempts to match instruction to learner characteristics such as perceptual abilities (e.g., modality preference) and cognitive abilities (e.g., IQ) have generally met with failure (Arter & Jenkins, 1977, 1979; Morsink, Thomas, & Smith-Davis, in press; Ysseldyke, 1973; Kavale & Forness, in press). Given the infrequency of aptitude-treatment interactions, it would be all the more remarkable that gross categorical groupings such as remedial and special education interacted with instructional approaches. Even if educational researchers were to discover strong interactions between treatments and student traits, it is likely that these traits would be distributed throughout students served under existing categorical groupings, resulting in a great overlap in the need for specialized instructions across categories.

As for teacher background and preparation, we hypothesize that the specialized knowledge required for teaching remedial students to read, write,

and think quantitatively is essentially the same as that needed to teach mildly handicapped students tne same basic skills and vice-versa. Data are lacking on this hypothesis, but a study by Marston (1987) is provocative. He reported that within special education, categorically trained teachers (e.g., those teaching EMR, LD, and SED populations) appear to be as successful in teaching students from diagnostic categories that do not correspond with their training as they are in teaching students from "their" diagnostic categories.

Instructional Validity Summarized

We have examined three facets of instructional validity underlying the concept of a noncategorical unified service delivery system for low-achieving students. On each facet--instructional level, learning rate, and need for a particular instructional methodology--the overlap of students across categorical groupings overwhelms any differences in group averages. In the words of Leinhardt et al. (1982), "From an educational point of view, the instructional rationale is the only possible reason for a separate system" (p. 407). The educational problem posed by student diversity arises from different instructional needs of average and high-achieving students vs. those of low-achieving students, rather than from differences in etiology or instructional needs among low achievers. Our analysis reveals that the instructional rationale does not support a continuation of separate systems, and that a unified program would be more instructionally valid. In short, current educational policy conflicts with principles of effective instruction.

Political Validity

We turn now from the classroom to the larger universe where possible solutions to the problem of fragmentation in categorical programs must be addressed. To unify the different programs, those involved must be convinced that the resulting system will, at the very least, do no harm and that it will bring benefits not achieved under the present system. Stakeholders in the system must have their interests protected; in this case, the stakeholders are the children who receive services, their parents, and professionals -- teachers and administrators at all levels -- within the system. Political validity comprises three issues: protection and equitable distribution of resources, participation in decision making, and protection of jobs.

Protection and Equitable Distribution of Resources

The major issue for all stakeholders in any changed system is that there is no reduction in services or the budgets that fund services. Protection from funding and service reductions is a concern across the composite of special and remedial programs as well as within individual programs. The goal of unification cannot be to economize; rather, it must be to strengthen and stretch available resources so that they are used more efficiently and effectively.

Estimates of the noninstructional costs of compensatory programs vary greatly. Fagan (1987) estimates that 85% of Chapter I monies result in instructional services. In contast, Haggerty et al. (cited in Leinhardt et al., 1982) report that only $400 of every $1,000 spent per child receiving compensatory education results in actual services. Perhaps Haggerty et al

have overestimated the administrative expenditures of compensatory programs; even so, it is plain to everyone that program administration and accounting costs are substantial. We suspect that the dilution of financial resources in special education is as great if not more than that in compensatory programs.

Funds saved through a restructuring of categorical programs need to be preserved for services to low-achieving students. They could be used (1) to amplify instruction routinely provided by special programs (e.g., form smaller, more homogenous instructional groups); (2) to broaden the scope of programs to include non routine services that are both instructional (e.g., teach study skills or social skills) and non-instructional (e.g., provide counseling, social work assistance); (3) to extend services to more students (e.g., include low-performing students in the program who would otherwise be excluded because of limited resources, i.e. those students who are said to "fall through the cracks" created by discrete categorical programs); or (4) to fortify the basic education program (e.g., provide direct assistance to classroom teachers through building level consultants, teacher assistance teams, or inservice training).

An issue closely related to the protection of resources is their equitable distribution. Because every special program was created for a specific client group, maintaining the hard won resources for those client groups is essential. Advocacy groups want to protect their clients' interests and may suspect that changes will dilute services, undermine established eligibility criteria, relinquish entitlements and rights, or prove harmful in some respect. Advocacy groups would not and should not consider supporting a program unification effort if there were a significant chance that their client group would lose resources to competing groups. At the same time,

allocation of resources would have to be rationally based on actual services needed rather than on eligibility criteria by which children are assigned to one program or another based on something as instructionally irrelevant as a formula specifying a minimum discrepancy between IQ and achievement. The problem of entitlement versus eligibility, as in entitlement to special education through P.L. 94-142 versus eligibility for Chapter I or remedial assistance programs, would need to be resolved in favor of entitlement. In any unified system, a sine qua non will be that low-achieving children are entitled to the services they need.

Participation in Decision-Making

Even if resources were protected and equitably distributed across low achieving groups, program integration would require stakeholders' participation in decision making. Parents of children with handicaps have grown accustomed to participating in planning for their children's educational program. These rights should be extended to all parents who have an interest in decisions about their children's placement in a special program. Parents and child advocates are not inextricably bound by the convention of labeling and categorizing students, but they will demand continued participation in decision making about their children's education.

Protection of Jobs

For program unification to be worthwhile, it must redirect unnecessarily or ineffectively utilized resources toward activities effective in achieving educationally desirable outcomes. Besides simplifying school operations, a probable outcome of reorganizing special programs would be the reallocation of

some jobs and the redefinition of others. For example, fewer positions for separate programs should result in fewer administrative duties and less complex fiscal accounting. This translates into fewer school administrators, financial managers, budget analysts, and accountants. Although some resistance can be anticipated, job reallocation from administrative and fiscal areas could be justified if the preserved resources were applied to direct, programmatic and instructional services. Reduction in personnel at the service provider level is not acceptable, but some job redefinition may be required. For example, if unifying separate categories simplified the criteria used to determine a student's eligibility for services, then school psychologists could devote less time to psychometric assessments and more time to consultation on classroom behavior and learning problems, to teaching social skills, and to counseling. Resistance can be anticipated by individuals who enjoy their role as psychometricians or who are unsure about their ability to provide other services, but this can be overcome through inservice training, better recognition, and increasing satisfaction in the new or changed role. More difficult to overcome would be the resistance that grows from psychologists' legitimate fear that their jobs will be reduced or eliminated if their psychometric duties were no longer legislated.

For a unified program to receive support from professionals, some guarantees would be needed for job security. A simple rule to adopt would be that no service providers lose their jobs, although their role might undergo some changes. Some provisions for job retraining would be a necessary element in re-forming special programs. If teacher or administrator certification requirements were to be changed, those affected would need assurance that any

training which they require would be available at no cost, and that they could continue in their jobs during the retraining period.

Benefits to be Derived

Even if the three political issues were resolved to the satisfaction of most people within the educational universe, does the unified system seem so ideal as to be out of the realm of feasibility? Perhaps a brief statement of some of the benefits it would yield will suggest the reasons for at least attempting to make it possible.

Looking at this from the point of view of stakeholders, we begin with administrators. It seems almost self-evident that any process for reducing the number of separate fiscal and program regulations that need to be monitored and adhered to would be welcome so long as there are educational benefits to be derived and not merely efficiency. Maintaining one, not several, accounting systems would increase the coherence of administrators' efforts. In a unified system based on children's entitlements rather than eligibility, administrators would have far fewer policing duties and could contribute to rational decisions about how best to provide services. At still another level of administration, it seems clear that principals, with a less fragmented service system for low-achieving children in their buildings, would be able to spend less time and effort on complicated staffing problems, resource allocation, and bookkeeping.

Teachers in categorical programs face a terribly divisive instructional situation when students receive services from a number of different programs and teachers, and when several programs operate within a building. There is a question of who "really knows" the child best; who is ultimately responsible

for his performance in school; who is providing what in the child's program. Unless there is extremely close cooperation between the programs and staffs, the results can be painful for all. It seems almost too obvious that if there were a unified system that provided instruction for all low-performing children, regardless of the problem that causes the poor performance, there would be fewer problems of ownership and more truly collaborative efforts to help children. Support teachers and psychologists working with classroom teachers could provide a more comprehensive picture of a child's problems and how to work through them in the classroom. Support teachers working in a unified system would be relieved of arduous recordkeeping regarding their time and the nature of services they provide to specific children.

We believe that children will benefit from a system in which they are grouped for instruction on the basis of how they are doing in school rather than on categorical label. Indeed the present fragmented system may work to the disadvantage of the children it is supposed to benefit. The artificial grouping of children, based on categorical label, may inadvertently dilute services by producing unnecessary heterogeneity. The teacher faced with a heterogeneous group generally provides less group instruction and assigns more individual work. The problem, however, is that "individualized instruction" can boomerang and become, quite simply, individual seatwork. The child is working alone and not receiving teacher attention. Can we measure the amount of lost instruction time in such a situation? Haynes and Jenkins (1986) found that handicapped children sent to special education resource rooms for reading instruction spent 52% of that time in private seatwork and only 25% of the total resource room time actually reading. There is no little irony in the possibility that a system of categorical programs based on presumably

different educational needs may in fact work to the detriment of children whose needs are more similar than different. This is one of the more serious issues policy makers will have to address.

Finally, parents are likely to be receptive to the idea of a unified system that maintains and amplifies services that dedicates more resources to direct services and less to adminstrative and record keeping functions, that simplifies the current bureaucratic maze associated with independent categorical programs, and that gives them a direct role in decision making about their children's programs.

Conclusion

We have discussed two major kinds of issues that influence the present system for educating low-achieving and mildly handicapped children in our elementary schools. There is increasing interest in addressing problems within that system, particularly the widely acknowledged problem of fragmented services. If that interest is in fact as widespread as the literature would suggest, these issues must now be addressed at the policy-making level. Data from studies such as the ones we have discussed can provide answers to questions about the instructional validity of the present system. Those answers can yield one set of realities that will eventually drive policy. But policy development will have to be the outcome of another reality -- resolutions to the political validity issues -- because there is so much at stake for people throughout this decidedly political system. In our view, the instructional validity questions are no longer the critical issues, because they are more readily answerable and to a large extent answered. We are not

the first to call for a unification of categorical programs for low-achieving students. Earlier Leinhardt et al (1984) reached the same conclusion based on an entirely different analysis. Now it is time to examine much more closely the political issues and the obstacles to their resolution.

One major source of fragmentation and irrationally allocated resources is the issue of entitlement vs. eligibility. On the whole, entitlement programs fare well because they are protected by law. Others, the categorical programs accessible through eligibility criteria, do not, because they can be changed more readily. We illustrate this by pointing out that between 1976 and 1983 the number of children identified as learning disabled increased from 800,000 to 1.8 million while the number of children served by Chapter I decreased by 1.5 million, despite the fact that there are more children below poverty levels now than before (McGill-Franzen, 1987). The inescapable conclusion is that children are being made to fit labels in order to receive entitled services. One possible solution to this problem is to simply recognize, by policy, that <u>any</u> child not performing well in the regular classroom is <u>entitled</u> to receive appropriate special services. If our data are correct in suggesting that the instructional needs of the members of this more broadly defined group of children are not distinct enough to warrant separate categorical programs, there is hardly any logic in fragmenting the programs to serve them.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Instructional Groups in Seven Elementary Schools Using Non-Categorical Groupings

	Number
Total number of instructional groups	173
Number of instructional groups containing special education students	67 (39%)
Number of instructional groups containing only special education students	4 (6%)
Median group size	6
Median number of special education students	1

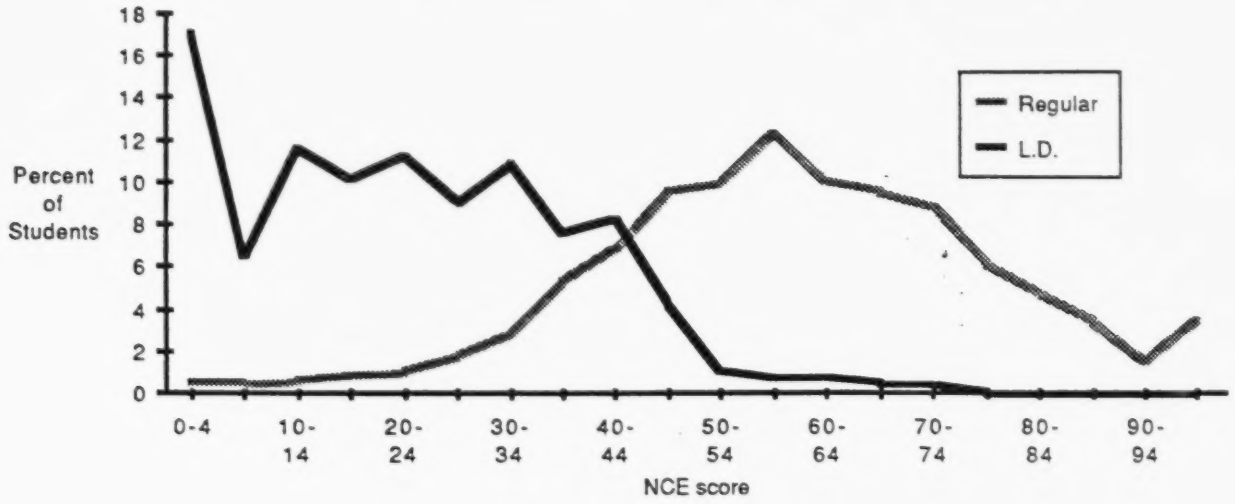
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Reading achievement levels of learning disabled students compared to students in regular and remedial programs.

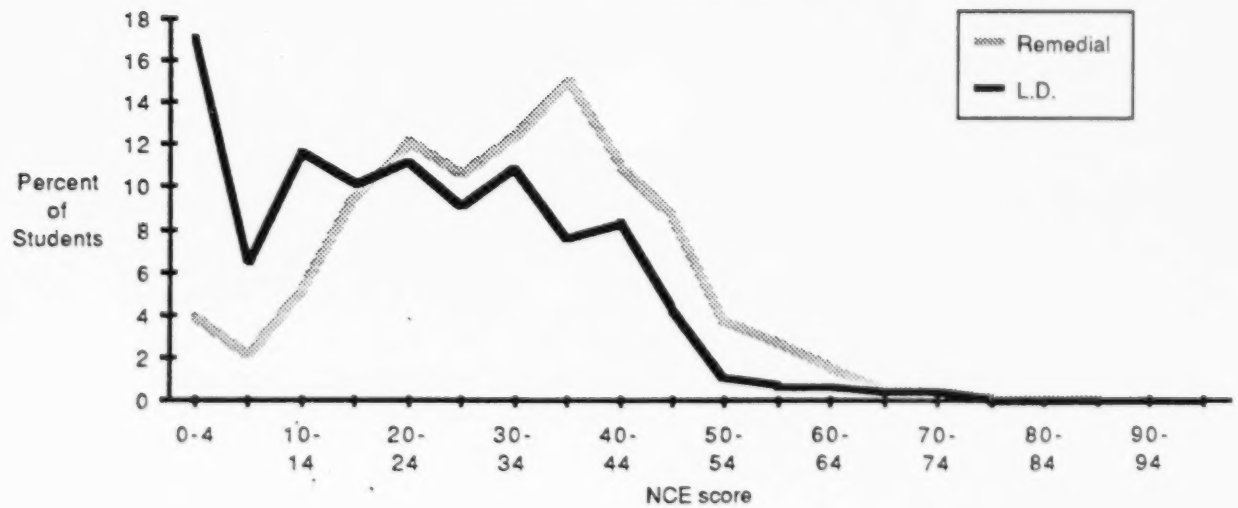
Figure 2. Annual gains in reading achievement of remedial and learning disabled students.

Reading Acheivement Test Scores

Regular and Learning Disabled Students



Remedial and Learning Disabled Students



Fall to Spring Gains in Reading Acheivement